

DCI BRIEFING

19 May 1961

LAOS

- I. Simultaneous with Geneva conference, important talks are taking place between opposing Laotian factions at truce village of Namone some 75 miles north of Vientiane.
 - A. Presence in Laos of principal Laotian protagonists--Phoumi, Souvanna Phouma and Souphannouvong--holds possibility that local agreement on coalition government may emerge.
 1. An "agreement in principle" on a coalition government was reached at Namone on 17 May between representatives of the three leaders.
 2. But government maintains cease-fire machinery necessary before political settlement, while other side demands reverse order.
- II. However, Communist demands backed by strong military posture, point to long hard road in both local talks and at Geneva.
 - A. In absence guidelines and control measures to enforce cease-fire agreement signed 13 May, Communists could decide at any time to use additional military leverage to influence outcome.
 1. Bloc propaganda accusations of continuing cease-fire violations by Phoumi's forces seen as building case if such action decided on.
- III. For present at least, serious fighting has ceased on all fronts with exception remote mountainous region south of Plaine des Jarres, where enemy forces are continuing efforts mop up government Meo guerrilla pockets, principally base camp at Pa Dong.

- A. So long as government effectives remain in area, enemy territorial claims are subject to dispute at conference table.
- B. Viet Minh shock troops apparently are assisting Kong Le - Pathet Lao forces in artillery assault on Pa Dong, which been going on for several weeks.
- C. Phoumi has complained to ICC re this situation but ICC not yet in position police cease-fire.
 - 1. Pathet Lao and their Communist mentors hold that ICC cannot operate until cease-fire regulations are drawn up by opposing Laotian forces, and Communists are dragging feet on this.

IV. Despite seemingly monolithic front against Vientiane regime, diverse viewpoints of neutralist Souvanna Phouma faction and Communist Pathet Lao may emerge into open as negotiations in Laos and Geneva unfold.

- A. Several reports have already been received of friction between Pathet Lao troops and those loyal to Souvanna.

- 1.
 relations between two sides were very bad and Souvanna was considering moving his forces apart from Pathet Lao to prevent fighting.

- B. Souvanna acknowledges Pathet Lao are under Communist direction but persists in belief he can wean bulk of membership away from hard-core leadership and thus frustrate Communist designs to take over country through coalition government a la Czechoslovakia.

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S E C R E T

1. Present entrenched position of Pathet Lao forces, bolstered by bloc military-political support and direction, make this an almost impossible task.

2. Sihanouk, dismayed over Communist power position in Laos, feels Souvanna no longer free agent but is still West's only hope.

C. In Laos and Geneva talks, tough demands by Pathet Lao negotiators such clearly indicate they will not be satisfied with/minor cabinet slots as Souvanna says he intends allot them.

V. Khrushchev claims he wants a unified, independent, and neutral Laos--like Austria--but Geneva will be good testing ground true Communist intentions, particularly those of Communist China.

A. Meanwhile Communist airlift and ground supply to Laos continues despite increasing monsoon rains.

VI. At least temporary boycott Geneva meetings by RLG delegation because of seating of Souvanna and Pathet Lao delegations reflects Vientiane's embattled mood and feeling that US has let Laos down.

A. This feeling generally shared by Thailand and South Vietnam who are participating in conference with reluctance.

BACKGROUND: SOVIET POSITION ON LAOS

VII. From beginning of Laos crisis last December, Moscow has pursued low-risk policy. USSR has avoided any actions which, in Soviet leaders' judgment, might lead to US or SEATO intervention, but at same time pressed stubbornly for most advantageous terms for negotiated settlement.

- A. In Soviet view, British proposals of 23 March for joint Anglo-Soviet cease-fire appeal, reactivation of ICC in Laos, and convening of conference provided acceptable framework for moving Laos issue into negotiating stage.
1. Bloc wished to tie hands of SEATO powers and its decision to issue generally favorable response of UK proposals reflected desire to create impression of moderate and constructive position.
- B. However, USSR continued to be evasive in dealing with mechanism for arranging truce and remained steadfast in its attempt to maneuver the West into agreeing to definite date for the conference before Western position on cease-fire verification could be satisfied.
- II. Sino-Soviet bloc entered Geneva Conference on Laos enjoying stronger bargaining position than West and determined to press this advantage in effort to test precise intentions of President Kennedy's administration in Southeast Asia.
- A. Sino-Soviet bloc sees conference as best means of translating superior military advantage now held by Pathet Lao into commensurate political gains in Laos.
- III. Preconference maneuvering by USSR suggested shift in Soviet thinking regarding formation of coalition government in Laos. Moscow probably hopes to stall on any early agreement and further its efforts at establishing equality of Pathet Lao representation with that of Vientiane Government and Souvanna Phouma.

- A. USSR undoubtedly views Western acceptance of seating of Souvanna representatives, Pathet Lao, and Vientiane delegates on equal basis as constituting at least de facto recognition of legitimacy of Souvanna regime.
- B. Soviet leaders probably also consider the cease-fire agreement--signed by all three Laotian factions--and Vientiane's agreement to meet at Namone in Communist-held territory to discuss political and military questions as other significant steps in attempt to assert parity of three sides.

IV. Opening speeches by Gromyko and Chen Yi reflects concerted Communist attack on SEATO and may well presage continued demands for its dissolution as one of Communists' major aims in conference.

- A. Peiping's Foreign Minister Chen Yi on 16 May termed SEATO the "root of tension" in Southeast Asia and condemned US policy not only in Laos but in Thailand and South Vietnam as well.
- B. Gromyko's speech on 17 May claimed that inclusion of Laos in SEATO treaty's "sphere of action" directly contravened 1954 Geneva Agreements and asserted that "this can no longer be tolerated."
 - 1. Gromyko drew distinction in speech between internal and international questions concerning Laos. Under internal he grouped formation of Lao government, holding of elections, and reorganization of army. He pointed out that it would be gross interference in Laotian internal affairs for conference to consider these questions. Soviet Foreign Minister also insisted on retention of veto power over ICC activities in Laos.

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